

Recognizing animal suffering and death in medicine

A remembrance ceremony allows researchers to acknowledge their indebtedness to animals

Last year, millions of mammals—including dogs, cats, rodents, rabbits, and monkeys—were killed in US laboratories.¹ We usually give little thought to this sacrifice, one that allows the development of new medicines and the chance for us as medical students and physicians to perfect our practical procedures. We rarely discuss our feelings about animal experimentation. Whether or not it is ethical to use animals in research, it is important to recognize their suffering and death. Our university's initiative to remember laboratory animals that have died is part of a global movement of remembrance. What does this movement hope to achieve?

Three years ago at the University of Washington, a group of students held a memorial ceremony for the university community to acknowledge the animals used in its biomedical research. It is now an annual event. Activists by nature, we were interested in influencing the way in which

we think about and practice modern medicine. Most of us were influenced by Buddhism, which emphasizes human respect for animals. Many of us had spent time caring for and about animals at different times in our lives and so were struck by the way in which animals were discussed in medical school lectures in a detached and abstract way—for example, as “animal models.”

While our school held 2 memorial events each year for the people whose bodies were used in anatomy training, nothing was done to acknowledge the 3,100 fellow primates and the 126,000 other animals used annually. Rather than joining 1 side of the usually polarized debate, we saw that as medical students and soon-to-be physicians, we could honor these deaths without making a stand for or against the use of animals in scientific research. Our focus was the contribution of these deaths and the suppressed emotions of laboratory workers, and we drew at-

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tention to the thoughtfulness that must be exercised when using animals in this setting.

The animal memorial ceremony recognizes the bonds that develop between laboratory workers and laboratory animals. It is with a certain level of discomfort that a human being inflicts suffering on another living thing, let alone ending its life. These feelings are glossed over and are not discussed with fellow workers or principal investigators. The research culture in the United States focuses on the results of the experiment and the disposal of "hazardous animal waste." The ceremony attempts to restore an emotional connection with laboratory animals. It allows the research community to express its feelings about these animals and to think about its indebtedness to them. Our initiative is also an attempt to think about ways in which we can reduce the number of animals used in research efforts. For example, we explore alternative research methods that do not involve animal models and work on developing research protocols in which animals are shared.

The University of Washington initiative is not unique. In Japan, South Korea, and Canada, several universities and research centers hold annual remembrance events. The Japanese and Korean gatherings are Buddhist ceremonies during which a bell rings to recognize the death of every animal during the previous year. More than 170 research facilities in Japan have permanent memorials acknowledging nonhuman research subjects. In New York, Ohio, and Ontario, Canada, nondenominational gatherings to reflect on animal use have been held annually for the past several years.² The pharmaceutical company Merck has developed a secular acknowledgment program,

including a video focusing on the relationships between laboratory workers and the animals that have been in their care, and it commissioned original artwork for a permanent exhibition. We hope that with time, this global movement will influence our treatment of animals and, in turn, how we treat our patients and each other.

Our remembrance initiative raises 2 important questions. Could such a gathering hinder medical research efforts at the university—slowing relief to humans who will benefit from advances in care? Could it, as some animal rights activists charge, offer solace to researchers, making it easier for animal use to continue? There are no easy answers to these questions.

Well-developed organizations weigh in on both sides of the debate on animal research. Pro-research groups, such as the Washington Association for Biomedical Research (www.wabr.org), are dedicated to building public support for animal use. Groups such as Physicians for Social Responsibility (www.psr.com) are opposed to most or all use of animals in this setting. What is often missing is an alternative viewpoint that straddles both sides. The remembrance movement provides a "third way" forward in the debate.

References

- 1 *Annual Animal Welfare Report* US Dept of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. Available at: www.aphis.usda.gov/ac/awrep99.pdf. Accessed May 31, 2001.
- 2 Taylor A, Davis H. Acknowledging animals: a memorial service for teaching and research animals. *Anthrozoös* 1993;6(4):221-225.

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